



# F-35 Lightning II Program

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Airmen assigned to the 56th Component Maintenance Squadron guide an F-35A Lightning II ejection seat onto a cart for maintenance at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., Jan. 11, 2018. In May 2017, three modifications were implemented to the F-35 ejection system to remove the 136 pound weight limit restriction. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Caleb Worpel)

## Luke F-35 seat modifications expand aviator pool

*By Airman 1st Class Caleb Worpel, 56th Fighter Wing, Public Affairs*

**LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz.** -- Since October 2015, pilots weighing less than 136 pounds has been restricted from flying the F-35A Lightning II due to concerns of possible neck injuries that could result during ejection seat procedures. In May 2017, three modifications were implemented to the F-35A ejection system allowing Air Force leadership to remove the weight limit restriction and begin the implementation of new seats into the Air Force's F-35 fleet.

The F-35 Joint Program Office worked with contractors and the manufacturer of the ejection seat to find a solution to the problem and maintain the safety of pilots. For Luke Air Force Base, this new modification positively affects the wing's mission to build the future of airpower.

"Currently, Luke has eight aircraft with the upgraded seats," said Senior Master Sgt. Jonathan Brannon, 61st Aircraft Maintenance Unit assistant superintendent. "Over time, all F-35s, including partner nation aircraft, are scheduled to receive the new modifications at Luke. Forty-four seats are still awaiting upgrades at this time."





An F-35A Lightning II is parked in a hangar prior to the removal of its ejection seat at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., Jan. 11, 2018. In the future, all F-35s that arrive at Luke will arrive with new ejection seat modifications. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Caleb Worpel)



Airman 1st Class Matthew Romano, 56th Component Maintenance Squadron egress systems technician, guides an ejection seat out of the cockpit of an F-35A Lightning II at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., Jan. 11, 2018. The F-35 Joint Program Office worked with contractors and Martin-Baker, the manufacturer of the ejection seat, to lift weight limit restrictions. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Caleb Worpel)



Senior Airman Bradley Isom, 56th Component Maintenance Squadron egress systems technician, controls an overhead crane used to remove an ejection seat from an F-35A Lightning II at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., Jan. 11, 2018. In May 2017, three modifications were implemented to the F-35 ejection system to remove the 136 pound weight limit restriction. (U.S. Air Force photo/Airman 1st Class Caleb Worpel)

According to Martin-Baker, the manufacturer of the ejection seat, more than 200 modification kits have been shipped for the F-35 program Air Force wide.

“This modification allows Luke, and the F-35 program as a whole, to broaden our scope of training by lifting the required weight restrictions,” Brannon said. “This is extremely beneficial by opening the spectrum to lighter weight pilots and gives us the ability to greatly increase our numbers.”

Over 50 percent of female pilots in the Air Force weigh below 136 pounds. This new modification not only improves safety measures, but also allows a more diverse number of future Airmen to become pilots.

“The modification will eliminate the potential for injury to lighter weight pilots and allow our aviators the ability to operate with zero concerns of their safety during egress,” Brannon said. “The future state for the seat modification looks very promising. The F-35 is being produced under low rate initial production and in the future, all F-35s that come off the production line will arrive with the new modification.”

The F-35 program continues to replace the aging fleet of tactical aircraft worldwide. With the advancement of new technology, the Air Force continues to reflect on and assess situations concerning pilot safety as they become available.

“I have personally briefed every single F-35 pilot in the United States Air Force about these changes to their ejection seat, and I’m confident our pilots are no longer concerned with the safety of the F-35 ejection system,” said Brig Gen Scott L. Pleus, F-35 Integration Office director and former 56th Fighter Wing commander. “I’ve flown in this seat myself and believe, with these modifications, this is the safest ejection seat I’ve ever flown.”

As the Air Force continues to combat its pilot shortage, this new modification not only expands the candidate pool of future aviators, but improves the safety of the Air Force’s greatest asset – it’s Airmen.